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ABSTRACT

Reports from the Indian Nations At Risk Task Force and the White House Conference on Indian Education identify as a national priority the need to retain American Indian and Alaska Native languages both as central elements in Native cultures and as national resources. A personal narrative of an Alaska Native man who grew up in the 1930s shows the importance of his native language to his cultural upbringing, and the gradual decline of native language use across the generations of his family. A contributing factor to generational language loss was the efforts of American schools to assimilate Native children, which included punishing children for speaking their traditional language. Recent findings show that learning languages in addition to English can enhance academic performance and that developing a strong language and cultural base is strongly and positively related to high academic achievement. The conclusion reached by the Task Force and White House Conference is clear: parents, tribes, schools, and governments all have a responsibility to promote the continued use of Native languages for academic and cultural reasons. Eight recommendations for systemic change made by the conference committee responsible for language and cultural issues are listed. (KS)

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BLUEPRINTS FOR INDIAN EDUCATION: LANGUAGES AND CULTURES

William Demmert

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Blueprints for Indian Education: Languages and Cultures

by William Demmert

ALTHOUGH ALL CULTURES are in a constant state of change, there are beliefs and customs that endure and help sustain a people's identity. For American Indians and Alaska Natives, these beliefs and customs are best expressed in their original languages. Two important studies on Native education—*Indian Nations At Risk: An Educational Strategy for Action* (October 1991) and the *Final Report of the White House Conference on Indian Education, Volumes I and II* (May 1992)—identify as a national priority the need to retain Native languages both as central elements in Native cultures and as national resources. This Digest connects personal experience to that of other Native peoples and to the findings of these two national studies. The Digest concludes with a summary of steps that must be taken at the local and federal levels, as recommended in the studies.

A Personal History

I grew up as a young Tlingit boy during the 1930s. In my earliest memories, I can recall my grandmother holding me on one of her knees and singing her clan songs to me in Tlingit. Very early she taught me the dance movements of a male dancer. As she held me she would tell me that I would soon be too big for her to hold on her lap. During the summers, I was expected to help my grandmother pick berries and make noise to chase away any bear that might be in the berry patch. Later, when I learned to row a double-ended rowboat, it was my job to transport her across the inlet to the smokehouse several times a day to tend the fire used for smoking the sockeye salmon that I had helped harvest with my Tlingit uncle. The rest of the time I was free to play with my friends in the community—rowing around the bay, swimming in the creek, and playing in the woods and under the family sawmill. We played in the fish cannery where we built huge caves out of empty boxes that would be used after our parents and other members of the community finished harvesting.

I spoke English but I remember the villagers of my grandparents' generation speaking to each other in Tlingit. When my parents and uncles spoke to each other they used English. When they spoke to the older generation they spoke Tlingit. I attended celebrations where the elders stood and talked in Tlingit. Dancers, wearing Tlingit costumes, danced to the music of clan songs and chanted in tune and time to a Tlingit drum.

During my middle childhood years I spent much of my time with my uncles. They taught me the skills to hunt for deer, trap mink, hang seine, jig for halibut, beach seine for the early spring steelhead and sockeye salmon, and make and blow an instrument used for calling deer. Much of our food was from the wild or from my grandmother's garden. During the winter, I watched the totem pole carvers in Klawock working on the large totems for the park that was being built.

Throughout their lives my uncles continued to speak to each other in Tlingit and to non-Tlingit speakers in English. I listened but not enough to really learn it. I understood it when I was younger and around my grandmother, for she spoke only Tlingit to her sons and to me. But I spoke to her in English. In this way I was like most of my generation in Klawock, who did not learn the Tlingit language. We spoke to our parents, aunts, and uncles in English, building a new language base for the government schools we attended.

The language base of my children and grandchildren is English. These two younger generations seldom, if ever, hear Tlingit spoken because they live in other parts of the country, seldom coming to Alaska where—to this day—they might hear my uncles and their generation speak the language to one another. I have lost the language, my children never learned the language, and my grandchildren have lost the *opportunity* to learn the language.

My personal experience is replayed in Native communities throughout the country and in the circumpolar North. I (and other Native educators) have come to realize that unless drastic steps are taken by schools, communities, and families, the remaining Native languages will be lost. This concern was expressed in testimony given during the development of the Indian Education Act of 1972 and, again, more recently in conjunction with the Indian Nations At Risk Task Force (U.S. Department of Education) and the White House Conference on Indian Education.

A Societal History

How did this pattern of generational language loss establish itself? Although there were other contributing factors, the schools played an important role. Schools, in carrying out early government language policies and in their efforts to "Christianize" American Indians and Alaska Natives, were instrumental in destroying the Native language base among most young Native students. Church schools and Bureau of Indian Affairs schools forbade the use of Native languages in the school environment and punished students for speaking their traditional languages.

Tribes responded in a variety of ways. Some passed English-only resolutions; others continued to use their languages through cultural activities and spiritual ceremonies. Many parents, punished for speaking their Native language as students, decided to teach their children only English. Still other communities, isolated from white America, continued to use their Native languages as their only means of communication and social and cultural exchange.

Listening to the People

In hearings held across the United States, those of us who served on the Indian Nations At Risk Task Force listened to people testify about the loss of languages and the deterioration of a Native cultural base among young Native children. Task Force members also commissioned papers and studied the research literature on language, culture, and academic achievement. Their findings: learning more than one language does not retard English language development, children can learn more than one language simultaneously and understand the differences, learning languages in addition to English can actually enhance academic performance, and developing a strong

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language and cultural base is strongly and positively related to high academic achievement.

In other words, children who are comfortable with their own culture and the position of their culture in the larger society are more apt to do well in school than children who are uneasy with the use of their Native language and cultural heritage. In fact, of the four reasons listed in the Task Force final report (1991) for why Native peoples are at risk, prominent among them is the schools' role in discouraging the use of Native languages in the classroom. "The task challenging Native communities is to retain their distinct cultural identities while preparing members for successful participation in a world of rapidly changing technology and diverse cultures" (p. 1). After studying all aspects of Native education, the Indian Nations At Risk Task Force (1991) recommended four national priorities for improving academic performance and promoting self-sufficiency among Native students. One of those four priorities was "establishing the promotion of students' tribal language and culture as a responsibility of the school" (p. 22). The Task Force also created 10 National Education Goals for American Indians and Alaska Natives. Goal 2 states that "By the year 2000 all schools will offer Native students the opportunity to maintain and develop their tribal languages and will create a multicultural environment that enhances the many cultures represented in the school." Relatedly, Goal 9 states, "By the year 2000 schools serving Native children will be restructured to effectively meet the academic, cultural, spiritual, and social needs of students for developing strong, healthy, self-sufficient communities."

Taking it to the Top

As the Indian Nations At Risk Task Force finished up its work in 1991 with the publication of its final report, another effort was already underway designed to help guide Congress and the President in their responsibilities to create and implement legislation impacting Native education. Planners for this second effort, the White House Conference on Indian Education (WHCIE), adopted as their organizing framework the 10 National Education Goals developed by the Indian Nations At Risk Task Force.

During the year leading up to the conference, state steering committees conducted hearings and other meetings designed to prepare and finalize recommendations to the Conference. As a result, committees submitted 30 reports; in 22 of them, Native languages and cultures were identified as priority aspects of any school improvement effort (WHCIE, 1992). The reports contended that Native languages were in critical danger of being lost and that Native cultural priorities were not consistent with what students were learning in school or in communities. The reports concluded that tribal priorities must include programs that strengthen the Native languages and cultures; and that parents, tribes, communities, and schools in partnership with each other must develop programs to strengthen surviving language and traditional skills and rebuild skills that have been lost.

The White House Conference on Indian Education was held January 22-24, 1992. Delegates from across the United States came together to make recommendations aimed at guiding the President and Congress in future legislation. The Conference committee responsible for language and culture issues, cochaired by Wilma Mankiller and me, made eight recommendations for systemic change, paraphrased below:

1. Amend the Bilingual Education Act of 1965 to include provisions that would (a) fund programs to strengthen Native American languages; (b) permit students to learn their tribal languages as a first or second language in school; (c) encourage partnerships among schools, parents, universities, and tribes; (d) provide long-term assessment and evaluation of language programs; (e) ensure that Native language teachers meet competency standards; and (f) develop innovative models for language programs.
2. Add provisions to other education-related legislation that would (a) develop curricula for restoring lost languages; (b) establish course credit for Native languages in institutions of higher education; (c) provide funds that would put reservation, rural, and urban Native groups on an equal footing; and (d) allow Native Americans to assume primary responsibility for their education programs.
3. Exempt language and culture monies from Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Act restrictions.
4. Design protections for parent involvement in Native education programming through various accountability, sign-off, and grievance procedure provisions.
5. Assign highest national priority to funding for Native languages, literacy, and cultural programs.
6. Implement related Indian Nations At Risk recommendations.
7. Put Native Americans in control of and hold them accountable for all federal education funds for Native peoples.
8. Recognize the significance of language and culture programs in efforts to improve schooling for Native Americans.

Conclusion

American schools—which did much to advance the destruction of Native languages and cultures during the period of assimilation in the first two-thirds of this century—have done little to reverse the devastating effects of those policies. In fact, the schools have not yet concluded that Native languages are important enough to include in the base curriculum. Where language and culture programs exist, by and large they tend to be supplementary programs that do not work particularly well.

What emerged from the work of the Task Force and White House Conference is clear: Parents, tribes, schools, and governments all have a responsibility to promote the continued use of Native languages for social and academic reasons. But there are compelling cultural reasons, as well. Like my own Tlingit inheritance, these languages and cultures are found in no other part of the world. If we allow the Native languages of the Americas to be lost, they will remain lost forever.

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